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The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge

Student Works

4-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Coffie, Kennedy, "Mastering Languages" (2018). *The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge*. 8.
https://spark.parkland.edu/mcdonald_award/8

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Mastering Languages

Kennedy Coffie

My mother always encouraged my sister and me to speak standard English. She was a teacher who encouraged her students to speak proper English. It would almost have been hypocritical if she didn't have the same expectations for her children. I found her emphasis on language annoying. My sister and I had personal conversations and often the phrases "I ain't got no" or "ion" (I don't) were said, and my mother would always correct us, making us repeat our sentences the way they should have been spoken the first time. "I don't have any." She often encouraged clear pronunciation of every word we spoke, stating how each word has the same value as the next and should not be mumbled or shortened. I hated talking at home. I was in an informal environment, so I felt my diction should represent that. But never would I have dared use the improper phrases that I used at home in public. That was for my mother's sake; she would have cringed from embarrassment if she heard us use such words or phrases from home in public. If she ran into someone at the store and the person asked my sister and me how we were doing, our response had to be, "Well, and yourself?" My mother did not want us to say, "good." Worlds apart, my father was much more relaxed about language than my mother. My father travelled back and forth to the south as a child; his southern influence played a significant role in his diction. He had a southern drawl as he spoke; he pronounced words slower, more drawn out. My father took pride in his speech, and so did his family. When my family visited his family in the south, my mother, my sister, and I would speak properly. There, our clear pronunciation of words was not nearly as appreciated as it had been in the north. My father's family felt like we thought we were better than them because we spoke

differently than they did. I never felt like we were better because we spoke more clearly than they did. I actually felt like they were better than us. They were comfortable using their own language and it brought them closer together. With us, there was a certain disconnect. My mother, sister, and I did not fit in. We were outcasts. Secretly, though, I wished I was able to use words like “finna,” “ain’t,” or “gon’.” I looked at my father’s family as the privileged ones. They had freedom of language. It was something interesting and colorful; it was creative. I craved it.

When I was eight, my mother passed away suddenly. At age eight, my reinforcement to speak properly died. After my mother passed away, my father was my sister’s and my primary caretaker. He never reprimanded us for the way we spoke. Because of that, I started to lose my knowledge of what proper language was. I could recognize it if I heard it or saw it, but to speak it seemed so foreign. My father had no high school diploma; he had no job and no marketable skills. Since we could no longer afford to live in the suburbs, my family moved to one of the many urban communities of Chicago. I transferred schools and I noticed that there was a huge difference in the quality of education I received. In Chicago, the schools seemed much less concerned with the quality of our English. I learned so much slang exclusive to my community and even to my school. I started to get wrapped into the language. I thought it was so interesting to have such a close-knit language that only a certain group of people understood. I felt like my community was exclusive. I liked it. I actually yearned for more. I learned words that were used in proper English but that had different meanings. In Chicago, the word “finesse” means to steal or to skillfully convince someone to do something. The dictionary definition of “finesse” means to “do something with intricate or refined delicacy.” We also used the word

“stain,” which in Chicago means to steal. It can also mean that one got a very nice deal on a product. So if I was to get a product half off of its original price, I would say, “That’s a stain”—as opposed to the dictionary definition of the word stain: “a dirty mark in clothes which is hard to remove.” I was able to learn that words had many different faces. It was amazing that one word could have such different meanings depending on the context.

As I got older, I was able to become more of an asset in my house. I had become of working age, and I wanted to help my father with bills. I started to apply for jobs and I received many interview offers. Jobs in the city were scarce, so I opted to apply in the suburbs. The chances of receiving a job were much higher there. I noticed, as I started to attend interviews, that I felt nervous and somewhat confused. The interviewer was almost always white and spoke very properly. I had gotten so used to urban language and slang that I was unsure of myself. I had forgotten how to speak proper English—the language my mother had gone out of her way to correct me for. I started to see the importance of her efforts and how beneficial down the line it would have been. During the interviews, I often found myself stumbling over words, second-guessing if the tense was correct and if I was articulating myself the best way I knew how. Months passed and I received no job offers. My interviews almost always concluded with, “If we are interested, we’ll give you a call.” I was certain that obtaining a job was a breeze for people used to speaking standard English. I decided to test it.

I started to consciously watch the way I spoke. I also listened to other people speak. Listening to others speak was the easiest way for me to relearn how to speak standard English. As I started to relearn how to construct sentences properly, I almost felt like a traitor. The language of my community was so different than that of the outside world. Speaking properly

in my neighborhood was not encouraged; once I started, I felt a disconnect from my community. I experienced a loss that Barbara Melix and Richard Rodriguez described in essays about the relationship between our language community and sense of identity. I felt like I was a sellout to a community that I felt so closely knit to. I identify with Rodriguez. I understand how he felt ripped away from his family after they had lost their language. Spanish was their bond. In their white, Catholic neighborhood, where only family seemed to share close similarities, it was extremely difficult to make the change to speak English.

In my life experience, only the affluent or aspiring affluent spoke properly. Some members of my community would say I was “trying to talk white.” I had feared that. I wondered why speaking properly and skin color had any relation. But it started to make sense to me. I observed that the languages of minorities in lower socioeconomic environments were composed of more slang. Creatively developing their own way of communicating was a way of establishing a bond. In more affluent neighborhoods, where there were not many people of color, their language was standard English. The ability to speak well and articulate oneself is essential for obtaining jobs, doing well in school, and eventually having good careers. It almost guarantees financial security. Once in a job or career, the ability to speak well may create more opportunities, which means more money. Employers value someone who can speak to the majority of people and be understood clearly across the board. More local, exclusive ways of speaking are great for establishing a sense of identity within a group of people. But someone speaking this exclusive language to a wider audience would not achieve clarity.

Growing up, I learned the importance of being able to incorporate both aspects of language. Language is tied to culture; it's important not to lose one's culture. It is also vital to be able to conform to the ways of communicating in different environments.